Human-animal studies in Australia: perspectives from the arts, humanities and social sciences[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a collection of four articles on social beliefs, values and practices associated with 'wild' animals in Australia. It provides an overview of key developments in the international and Australian fields of Human-Animal Studies and briefly addresses the value and challenges of cross-disciplinary communication and collaboration in this field.

Following papers: A. Davison and B. Ridder, *Turbulent times for urban nature: conserving and re-inventing nature in Australian cities*. Page 306. J. Bough. *From value to vermin: a history of the donkey in Australia*. Page 388. L. Christensen. *The Man Who Loved Tortoises*. Page 322. N. Smith. *Thank your mother for the rabbits: bilbies, bunnies and redemptive ecology*. Page 369.

Key words: Human-Animal Studies, cross-disciplinary, Australia, International

The study of human interactions with animals is of interest to a growing number of social scientists and other humanities scholars in Australia and beyond. The four papers selected for this issue of *Australian Zoologist* have been contributed by a historian, an anthropologist, a creative writer, and a social geographer collaborating with an environmental philosopher. Together they represent a small sample of the wide variety of work currently being undertaken in a field that explores the importance of animals in human societies. This multidisciplinary set of academic endeavours is increasingly grouped within the common field of animal studies, or human-animal studies, a research area that has enjoyed steadily expanding popularity across the arts, humanities and social sciences in recent years, particularly in Europe and the United States (see, for example, Arluke and Sanders 1996; Fudge 2002; Heninger-Voss 2002; Knight 2005; Manning and Serpell 1994; Rothfels 2002). In this introduction we provide a brief overview of the extent of this field in international and Australian contexts and reflect upon how such research can contribute to the dialogue between humanities and the biophysical sciences.

Why is Human-Animal Studies Important?

Animals play a myriad of significant roles in human society, as companions, as resources, as symbols and as crucial contributors to our shared ecosystems. Debates about the moral relationships between human and non-human animals are of increasing priority in light of growing public awareness and concern about environmental management and the long-term benefits of ethical and sustainable lifestyles. Threats to biodiversity, for example, are directly linked to culturally shaped values, beliefs and practices associated with perceptions of the nature and importance of non-human animals in general, and by preferences for particular animal species and characteristics. Although often taken for granted, our understanding of non-human animals is intimately connected to our understanding of, and assumptions about, human identities and experiences, our place in the world and the future of human societies. The development of a rich body of international and cross-disciplinary research on human-animal interactions thus constitutes an important, albeit fragmentary, component of current scholarship in the arts, humanities and social sciences. This work is currently being done by anthropologists, historians, sociologists, psychologists, cultural geographers, political scientists, creative artists and writers and a range of others in universities throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. Researchers focussing on the human experience of animals seek to provide new insights into the often intangible, but powerfully motivating, values and beliefs underlying social practices associated with the management and conservation of wild and domestic species. Such studies provide an important complement to those being done by biological and environmental scientists who seek to improve our understanding of the ecological role, the physical functioning and the complex behaviour of non-human animals themselves.

Research in the social sciences, arts and humanities can help to make explicit some of the impacts that shifting social values and motivations can have for the policy and practice of animal management[2] at a variety of levels, from national responses to introduced species that pose significant environmental or economic threats, to householder attitudes towards the interactions of domestic pets and local native species. Such research has the potential to contribute deliberately relativist perspectives by documenting multiple, often contesting, attitudes towards the roles that animals play in a variety of human-related contexts. These efforts can provide a productive and necessary challenge to dominant understandings and interpretations of issues associated with animal management. They can introduce alternative sets of values, priorities and interests into the mix of commentaries on human interactions with animals that circulate through the wider society and that impact on everyday perceptions and practices. Research that focuses on the implications of human agency, in combination with animal agency, offers an indispensable complement to all other kinds of research associated with aspects of animal management, especially species conservation. After all, as many environmental scientists now acknowledge, conservation policies based on the most thorough and accurate scientific research are of limited value if they do not have the support and compliance of the local community. At the same time, scientific research is also a socially informed activity that can be shaped in a variety of ways by contemporary social and economic values, priorities and concerns. As most who have tried it are aware, however, talking across the intellectual and methodological traditions of the social and physical sciences can be a fraught and discouraging experience.

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[1] This paper is the introduction to a series on the theme of human-animal studies, edited by Natalie Lloyd and Jane Mulcock, for this edition of *Australian Zoologist* (eds).

[2] We use the term 'management' in its broadest sense, acknowledging that both actual and conceptual engagements with animals have implications for future engagements at both applied and theoretical levels. What we 'think' and 'feel' about animals becomes manifest in the ways that we 'manage' our interactions with them, formally and informally.

Environmentally focussed humanities research (to which human-animal studies contributes) is a rapidly expanding field in Australia and its practitioners grapple regularly with the challenges of cross-disciplinary collaboration and communication (see for example, Head, Trigger & Mulcock 2005, Minnegal 2005, Grafton, Robin & Wasson 2005). While the potential for cross-pollination of ideas and approaches is rich, the realties of bridging the perceived gap between the biophysical sciences and the arts, humanities and social sciences are often characterised by misunderstanding (Gould 2004). Personal and disciplinary preferences for qualitative or quantitative research, for example, are frequently at the core of such confusions. While Human-Animal Studies have developed from the outset as an interdisciplinary domain with many of its practitioners being familiar with the quantitative approaches of the environmental and biological sciences, the papers presented here are almost entirely qualitative in their content and methods. Their contributions lie, at least partly, in their ability to observe, document and communicate some of the contradictions, subtleties, uncertainties and passions that inform human responses to animals in Australia. In doing so, the authors seek to raise questions for further discussion and analysis in a systematic and well-informed manner. Each, in their own way, addresses scientific understandings of animals in combination with social understandings, and it is this synergy, in particular, that we believe paves the way for future exchange and mutual intellectual enrichment.

The International Scene

The study of animals and their interactions with humans has an extensive history and the recent coagulation of scholars and ideas draws on well-established and diverse sources. Current developments are very much marked by perspectives on animals that respond to broader theoretical debates within the humanities. The scholarly content of international animal studies is predictably tied to local ideological and material conditions. In historical and sociological studies emanating from settler societies, such as the United States and Australia, relationships between colonisers and both native and introduced animals have been central (DeJohn Anderson 2004; Franklin 2005, Morton & Smith 1999, Trigger & Mulcock 2005, Crosby 1986). Broader animal studies themes abound. For example, human-animal relationships constituted through the enframed settings of the zoo, the wildlife documentary and other electronic mediums have come under recent scrutiny (Mullan and Marvin 1998; Rothfels 2001; Henninger Voss 2002; Akira Mizuta Lippit 2000). Also, the now more traditional assumptions about power relationships that characterise human-animal relations in the 'modern West' are increasingly questioned, particularly by work that interrogates the visual and other embodied relations between human and non-human animals (Burt 2002; Baker 2000). This questioning indicates the strength and potential of human-animal studies to challenge parochial ideas and methodologies, by drawing attention to the complexity of relations between human and non-human animals that have existed across time and space.

Two recent publications provide an excellent overview of human-animal studies to date. In 2002, *Society & Animals* journal celebrated its tenth anniversary with a special issue entitled 'The State of Human-Animal Studies'. The papers in this collection assess the key developments in the field within the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, criminology, political science, geography, economics, postcolonial studies and women's studies. In his editorial introduction, Kenneth Shapiro (2002) acknowledges that while interest in human-animal studies exists across a wide span of disciplines it remains a marginal area of research.[3] The themes receiving most attention, according to the contributors to this special issue are associated with the perceived therapeutic benefits for humans of positive interactions with animals (Melson 2002, Raupp 2002) ; human mistreatment of non-human animals/ animal welfare (Arluke 2002, Beirne 2002); symbolic representations of animals and the political and philosophical implications of such representations (Mullin 2002, Garner 2002, Armstrong 2002, Birke 2002, Emel, Wilbert and Wolch 2002); and the economic values associated with animal management and production (Ritvo 2002, Frank 2002). A five volume collection entitled *Animals and Society* (Inglis & Wilkie 2006), part of Routledge's 'Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences' series, provides an even more thorough overview of the field. A similar set of themes and disciplines are covered in this collection of ninety two papers[4] with additional attention to the ethical and moral status of non-human animals in relation to humans.

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[3] Although he notes (2002, p.333) that there are a core of researchers working in sociology, psychology and geography. Anthropology could also be justifiably included in this list, especially in the Australian context, but see Mullin 2002.

[4] All of these are reprinted from original publications spanning 1928 to 2006.

With the growth of new interest in the study of human-animal relations from across a variety of humanities and social science disciplines has come the inevitable concerns of activist and animal rights based groups who, along with human-animal studies scholars emanating from psychology and veterinary science, have a much longer established involvement in the field. These concerns regard the possible shift of focus from the progressive agenda of animal rights activists to the more isolated and relativistic consideration of animals as objects of humanities and social science investigation. Tensions between the study of the cultural/historical contexts to human-animal relationships and the animal welfare and rights concerns of activists is a major issue that will affect the political morphology of animal studies organisations and associated pedagogy as they further evolve. These tensions will and have already produced positive cross-fertilizations. Steve Baker, for one, has argued for the potential of animal studies to contribute to a productive rather than obtusely critical strain of postmodern scholarship, through the investigation of what it means to be human and animal. (Baker 2000 & 2001).[5]

The International Society of Anthrozoology (ISAZ), a multidisciplinary society of academics predominantly from the United Kingdom and the United States, is one of the major international hub organizations that have facilitated the scientific and scholarly study of human-animal interactions for more than ten years. The interests of the Society include attitudes to animals, companion animal behaviour and welfare, anthrozoological research methods, medical and social consequences of human-animal interaction, history and sociology of human-animal interactions, and gender effects on human-animal interaction. Their journal, *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of the Interactions of People and Animals,* has been in publication since 1991.[6] The International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organization (IAHAIO), based in the United States, was also formed in the early 1990s to gather together organizations and associations interested in advancing the understanding and appreciation of the link between animals and humans. This group is recognized as the umbrella organization for those working in the scientific study of human animal interaction, or the human animal bond. The Animals and Society Institute (ASI) is another US based group. It edits two scholarly journals (*Society and Animals* and *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*) and a book series (Human-Animal Studies). ASI also maintains an online resource centre and a listserv on its website.[7] This group, together with the Center for Respect of Life and Environment (CRLE – an affiliate of The Humane Society of the United States), is currently promoting the institutional development of human animal studies, particularly through recognition of university courses in the field, the consolidation of syllabi and bibliographical sources.

Human-Animal Studies in Australia

There is little doubt that the increasing occurrence of human-animal studies research and teaching at the international level will lead to a corresponding growth in the Australian academy. There already exists, in addition to the work by authors featured in this volume, a variety of published sources on human-animal relations written by both established and new humanities and social science scholars residing in Australia, including work that addresses specifically Australian subjects (see for example Bulbeck 2005, Munro 2005, Franklin 2005 & 1999, Robin 2001, Peace 2002 & 2001, Anderson 1997 & 1995, Gaynor 1999a & 1999b, Smith 1999, Lloyd 2005, Freeman 2005, King 2005, Touissaint 2005). The particular combination of themes and foci in the Australian context will be the unique and identifying mark of human-animal studies scholarship as it further develops across the Australian academy. Organisations that reflect the growing consolidation of the field include the Anthrozoology Research Group at the Psychology Department at Monash University, the Centre of Animal Welfare and Ethics based in the Veterinary School at the University of Queensland, and at the University of Western Australia, the Animals & Society (Australia) Study Group, initiated by Natalie Lloyd and Jane Mulcock in 2004, has emerged as a network for Australian-based researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences. It is from the inaugural conference of this particular group, held at the University in July 2005 that the following four papers derive. [8]

The success of the 2005 conference bodes well for Australian animal studies. It attracted new and established researchers from at least twenty different universities (including four international institutions) and several animal-related industries and agencies. Over fifty presentations, forty seven by Australian-based scholars, revealed a widespread interest in the relationships between human and non-human animals, wild and domestic. The papers presented at the conference contributed Australian perspectives on a set of international themes and concerns including questions of feral animals, domestication, animal protection and conservation of faunal biodiversity. The conference also furthered the project of multidisciplinary enquiry by bringing together a variety of perspectives on human-animal interactions, opening up the space for dialogue and exchange. Presentations covered aspects of the human-equine relationship, the management and conservation of feral and endangered species and the roles and rights of domestic animals. Representations of animals in art, literature and law were also explored by a number of speakers, many of whom asked questions about the divisions and overlaps between human nature and the perceived nature of non-human animals. The blurring of these categories was explored in particularly interesting ways in presentations about the conceptual and ethical challenges of biological art and Xenotransplantation.

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[5] The growing international network of animal studies scholars in the humanities and social sciences is now facilitated by H-Animal, a list-serve run under the rubric of H-Net and hosted by Michigan State University, see http//:www.h-net.org/~animal.

[6] See the ISAZ website http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/CCAB/anthro%7E1.htm (accessed 19.02.06)

[7] See www.societyandanimalsforum.org.

[8] See www.animalsociety.arts.uwa.edu.au

All four of the papers presented here, through the comparison of different stakeholder perspectives across time and place, highlight the ways in which the human appreciation of non-human animals shows a strong correlation with the values of environmental productivism and/or protection in Australia. These values do not necessarily represent impermeable categories, rather they leak and overlap. As has been identified elsewhere by international animal studies scholars, the beliefs and attitudes that inform human-animal relations are multiple and contradictory (Ritvo 1994; Franklin 2005). The four papers locate and assess the sometimes emotive and rhetorical discourses and debates surrounding feral and native animals, and reveal the impacts of these on the actual animals that inhabit Australian environments. Jill Bough gives an historical account of the donkey, which shows the journey of this animal from 'value to vermin' across both the physical landscape and that of the Australian imaginary. Nicholas Smith interrogates the potent values that have informed perceptions of the rabbit, also addressing change across time and the legacies of powerful colonial and post-colonial myths. Liana Christensen's paper is a creative exploration of conservation efforts to ensure the survival of Western Swamp Tortoise populations. She seeks to emphasise the personal and emotional element of the scientist's intimate and knowing relationship with these animals. Aidan Davison and Ben Ridder address the very important question as to what exactly constitutes a 'natural' environment? They make a constructive, critical appraisal of the categories that determine the focus of conservation management policies and funding.

The papers strongly represent the value of dialogue between the Humanities and Life Sciences, particularly in addressing prominent problems and lacunae such as future directions in biodiversity and conservation (Davison & Ridder), environmental values, ethical relationships with animals, and their differing status and worth across communities and interest groups (Smith and Bough), and the important task of communicating the work of animal scientists to a more general audience (Christensen). We have selected papers that address issues associated with wildlife (native and feral) in the belief that these will be of greatest interest to the *Australian Zoologist* readership. We recognise that one of the major stumbling blocks to cross-disciplinary communication is often the use of discipline-specific language. Each of our contributors has therefore sought to convey the strengths of his or her particular perspective with minimal jargon. The authors represent different disciplinary approaches to the animal studies field. The methodology of the historian, emphasising the essential contribution of a detailed historical context, differs to the interpretive focus of the anthropologist, while the assessment of large-scale categories and processes by the social geographer and environmental philosopher differs to the creative writer's emphasis on individual perseverance and passion in the face of overwhelming odds. Although the study of animals and society is multidisciplinary by nature, there are still many challenges involved in building a truly collaborative network that will continue to expand this area of research in Australia. Nonetheless, the conference indicates, in combination with an email list of over one hundred researchers who have animals and society as their focus, that this is a growing field with the potential to make valuable contributions to our understanding of Australian relationships to 'natural' environments and the non-human species that inhabit them. It is our intention that the papers chosen for inclusion here will stimulate new discussion and debate, thus narrowing the divide a little further.

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